

Raúl Rodríguez-Ferrándiz\*

# Faith in fakes: Secrets, lies and conspiracies in Umberto Eco's writings

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a re-reading of the works of Umberto Eco, be they academic, journalistic or literary, with a *pseudologic* tone: his desire to investigate the mechanisms of lying, and their relation with fiction, falsification, error, secrecy, and conspiracy. The study will review some of his main academic texts in the fields of semiotics, rhetoric, and aesthetics, and will make some references to his recent novels and essay compilations, as well as offer an explanation of how the evolution of his thoughts takes a pessimistic turn. The face of the lie, which initially was aesthetic consolation and consumerist delusion, and then a game of intelligence, a creative stimulus and an interpretive challenge, changes when serves the purpose of extortion, manipulation, and war. In short, it could be argued that Eco became increasingly disappointed by deceptions, and lost faith in fakes and forgeries.

**Keywords:** Umberto Eco, lie, secrecy, aesthetics, rhetoric, semiotics

As a scholar of semiotics, I have always maintained that what characterizes signs and languages is not so much that they serve to name what is before our eyes, but that they serve to refer to what is not there. In this way, they also serve to lie. The problem with lying and falsehood has always been, from the theoretical point of view, very important for me. It is linked to the problem that concerns all philosophers: truth. It is very difficult to establish what it is true. Sometimes it is easier to establish what is false.

– Interview with Umberto Eco, April 2015.

I said, “Ah now, Commandant. One gathers that some people have their doubts about the *Protocols*?”

“Oh do they,” said Doll. “Well I hereby refer them to *Mein Kampf*, which makes the point quite brilliantly. I can’t remember it word for word, but this is the gist. Uh ... *The Times* of London says again and again that the document is a fabrication. That alone is proof of its authenticity ... Devastating, nicht? Absolutely unanswerable.”

– Martin Amis, *Zone of Interest*

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**\*Corresponding author: Raúl Rodríguez-Ferrándiz**, Universitat d’Alacant, Alacant, Spain,  
E-mail: [r.rodriguez@ua.es](mailto:r.rodriguez@ua.es)

# 1 Introduction

Scholars of the work of Umberto Eco have highlighted, alternately or jointly, some of the recurring themes. We recall, among others, his nuanced defense of mass culture (Escudero Chauvel 1997), but also his interest in literary and artistic avant-gardes and their relationship with mass culture (Bouchard 2009), his theoretical and practical passion for encyclopedias as knowledge architecture (Violi 1998, 2015) and his efforts to define interpretation as an open yet limited activity (Pisanty and Pellerey 2004: 325–408; Pisanty 2015). Last, but not least, Eco will be remembered for his constant efforts to develop semiotics, not so much as a strong discipline but as an analytical instinct, or nose, that must be developed in order to form critical citizens.

This paper jointly not only discusses Eco's essays, but also his literary and journalistic works, and maintains that they are interwoven. This is, certainly, not very relevant or exceptional, as this intertwining happens with many writers who combine these genres,<sup>1</sup> but it will be useful to argue that all of these works are interwoven (which may be relevant and unusual) with deep reflection about lies and their relation with important aspects of mass culture and communication, society, politics, and art. In particular, this paper will focus on those aspects that contrast lies with truths, authenticity and facts, and on their relationship with fiction (Eco 1994d, 2004), irony (1998, 2004), fakes and forgeries (1994c [1990]: 174–202), error (1998, 2013), secrecy and conspiracy (1992; 1994c [1990], 2010b, 2012 [2008]). Eco conceived falsehood as an epistemological incentive, as a creative means, and as renewable energy that feeds not only the production and interpretation of signs, but also the semiotic lessons that can be drawn from them.

## 2 *Kitsch* as an artistic lie

In *Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals*, one of Eco's pre-semiotic essays of the mid-1960s, he already shows concern for the artistic lie: *kitsch* (1989: 83–140).

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<sup>1</sup> Eco himself reflected on the connection between his work as a columnist in the press and his academic works in the preface of one of his compilations, titled *Faith in fakes* (1986a: X). The public interventions of Eco in cultural, political and social debates of his time were unfaltering, as proven by almost fifty years writing in newspapers (mainly *L'Espresso*) and numerous collections of articles and essays in the press, many of which have been translated into English (Eco 1986a, 1993 [1963], 1994b, 2007, 2012 [2008], 2017). A more recent reflexion about the intertwining of his scholarly, literary, and journalistic works can be read in an interview by James Hay (Eco 2013). The relationship between his academic works and his novels has been highlighted by Coletti (1988), Bondanella (1997), and Caesar (1999).

Eco collects the speculations of the most conspicuous theorists (Broch, Adorno, Greenberg, Giesz, MacDonald) to characterize this slippery and hypnotic aesthetic category. He assumes that it is a *double* falsification. On the one hand, it is perpetrated by the modern artist who replaces the imitation of the act of imitating (self-reference and reflection on the artistic procedure typical of avant-garde movements) with the imitation of the effect of imitation (the anxious search not for sense and sensibility, but for sentimentality and sappiness, the manufacture of the expected reaction, inscribed in the text itself). On the other hand, this falsification is committed as well by the lazy audience member who enjoys not the work, but the effect that is prefabricated and served alongside it. In essence, the audience member is actually enjoying his own reactions and suffering himself; he projects his personal circumstances on a work that represents archetypal passions. It makes him vibrate on the same wavelength, and traps him within the homeopathic magic of the effect triggered by the work itself: laughter, tears, outrage, terror, mercy (1989: 9).

Kitsch is a substitute, an *Ersatz* of a work of art: it aims to ensure enjoyment without going through the gates of discovery, experience, and judgment of taste. Unsure of its own worth, kitsch should include, in represented form, the reaction that it would like to arouse, and not leave it to the decision of the public. But not only that, this effect should be celebrated more, signposted, and contain its own promotion. Kitsch is simultaneously a pharmaceutical leaflet and an advertising brochure of aesthetic delight. It is an invitation to “get excited (and precisely this way)!”

The mature Hemingway, he who wrote *The Old Man and the Sea*, offers a kitsch deception when he imitates his own primitive style (dry, paratactical, with the cadence of biblical prose), but adorns it with more meticulous and often cheesy descriptions, as if he were interpreting in advance what the reader should feel. The protagonist – “the old man,” an archetype like “the boy” – furls the sail, which looks like “the flag of a permanent defeat,” and boasts a conscious humility which seems a contradiction in terms. In the words of Dwight MacDonald, from whom Eco takes this cruel example, kitsch is a reverse alchemy that produces its effect. It was not pure chance that the novel, which was originally published in *Life* in 1952, won the author the Pulitzer Prize a year later and contributed decisively to his winning of the Nobel Prize in 1954. However, these awards are golden lead, not literary gold.

In contrast to the relentless critics of kitsch, remembered and summarized by Eco, the Italian author establishes very sensible distinctions. Linking kitsch with mass culture as a whole is a simplification. On the one hand, there are mass cultural products which undoubtedly tend to provoke reactions (Zane Grey’s western novel, the television soap opera genre, dance music, pornography) but

do not aspire to be high-brow and therefore cannot betray it. On the other hand, great art has never renounced the provocation of reactions: since Sophocles and Euripides (and Aristotle whose works theorized about tragic catharsis) art has sought to produce an effect on the receiver. And finally, the middle-brow art that is produced and reproduced *en masse* in industrial society comes out to meet its audience (Benjamin) and facilitates the decoding of the message, without trying to take the place of more elaborate and demanding artistic experiences, but serving as facilitative mediation. This seems very reasonable and healthy (Escudero Chauvel 1997; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2001, 2010).

Kitsch, therefore, should be reserved for artistic malicious falsehood. The falsehood that, to justify its effect-stimulating function, is covered with the remains of other experiences, and is sold as art without reservation. The falsehood that, aware of its inability to structurally integrate the highbrow quote from other emblematic writing styles in a new context, too weak to bear them, tries to smuggle this quote into a work, as something original, and pass it off as artistic achievement (1989: 201).

Eco, in a sense, reverses the terms: true melodramatic kitsch is the emendation to all mass culture which represents select criticism, and therefore embodies the most genuine and most cryptic falsehood. The apocalyptic Jeremiad

resembles the barely disguised manifestation of a frustrated passion, a love betrayed, or rather, the neurotic display of a repressed sensuality, similar to that of a moralist who, in the very act of denouncing the obscenity of an image, pauses at such length and with such voluptuousness to contemplate the loathsome object of his contempt that his true nature – that of a carnal, lustful animal – is betrayed (1994a [1964]: 25–26).

The apocalyptic critic “commits” falseness when he supports “the restoration of an apparent adherence to the timeless value of Beauty, which is generally only a cover for the mercenary of Kitsch” (1989: 216).

### 3 *Suasion as a rhetorical lie*

If we move from aesthetics to rhetoric, the early work of Eco is also marked in this field by the discussion of lying, in particular the mechanisms of deceptive persuasion. In *La struttura assente* (1968), Eco offers his reflections on messages in advertising and looks at advertising as the intersection of two oppositions. On the one hand, the opposition between rhetorical and ideological levels (expression and content, respectively), in the words of Barthes (1977 [1964]: 32–51), and, on the other hand, from the perspective of information theory, the opposition

between what provides new information, and is thus *nutritious*, and what only offers clichés, and is thus *consolatory* and redundant (Bianchi 2011). At that time, Eco believed that advertising could be rhetorically nutritious, but its ability to transform our persuasions on an ideological level was limited, because its dependence on the market and consumption seriously constrained that eventuality. Advertising comforts with false argumentation: it invites the receiver to complete incomplete reasoning (an enthymeme), but it is in fact tricky and manipulative. It seems to induce us to make new decisions (buy a product, support a political opinion, etc.), but it does so with premises, arguments and stylistic resources which belong to the universe of ideas that the receiver already takes for granted, and therefore pushes us to do, albeit in a different way, what we have always done.

For the Eco of that time, even the advertising of Bill Bernbach and the DDB agency for Volkswagen in the US (which the Italian author immediately identified as worthy of an in-depth analysis to verify its minimalist uniqueness in a consumer sector prone to hyperbole, emphasis on design, luxury and the profusion of technological gadgets) sank into a false, only apparent, nutritious ideological mobilization. In essence, what VW did was assume a different position, somewhere between *beat* and *hippie*, in a market saturated with brands of social status and aspiration (1968: 265–267). When Bernbach showed the small *Beetle* on a white background with the slogans “Don’t let the low price scare you off” and “Think Small,” and text that praised modesty, saving, and Spartan austerity in design and accessories, he was not stirring the foundations of the industry, but identifying another niche market, another lifestyle aspiring to another possible world of products and services.

However, the exceptional nature of this search for niche markets soon became the norm. As Thomas Frank says: “If American capitalism can be said to have spent the 1950s dealing in conformity and consumer fakery, during the decade that followed, it would offer the public authenticity, individuality, difference, and rebellion” (1997: 9). In fact, Bernbach together with other creative people of the era known as the “Creative Revolution” made “hip become the dynamic principle of the 1960s, a cultural perpetual motion machine transforming disgust with consumerism into fuel for the ever-accelerating consumer society” (Frank 1997: 68). This was when *ad hoc* strategies started to be used to adulate groups of consumers segmented by variables of age, gender, status, lifestyle, etc. These strategies reassured consumers that *their* choice was genuine, that it represented the indomitable avant-garde, that it was not, therefore, comparable in any way to the homogenized and alienated consumption of the rest of society. The lie, thus, continued its triumphant path, not trying to fool all, but each individual.

In this way, Eco pioneered an insightful critique of the strategies and techniques of mass propaganda and persuasion (1968: 167), which at that time opposed greater forms of persuasive reasoning. Eco concluded that advertising had no informative value, although its boundaries were not based on the possibility of persuasive reasoning (whose mechanisms allow for much more nutritious adventures), but on the economic conditions governing the existence of the advertising message (1968: 275).

Almost twenty years later, Eco resumed his speculations on advertising rhetoric and intoned a *mea culpa*:

Although we knew that the *Discourse Method* was a rhetorical argument, we thought that advertising and political propaganda were a form of persuasion that was qualitatively distinct from other types of arguments (mystical, religious, philosophical, political), to be more explicit, a persuasion prone to deception. (Eco 1986b: 15, my translation)

Eco reviews these boundaries, fueled by prejudice, and proposes not their cancellation and the proclaiming of the postmodern motto “everything-is-possible,” but instead to draw them, clearly and distinctly, in another place. Along this line, Eco compares the argumentation of an economist in defense (or denigration) of the free market and an airline company advertisement which emphasizes the quality of its service to travelers. The former uses graphs and tables, which are translatable (or rather interpretable) in verbal statements, while the latter uses an emphatic claim, accompanied by photographs of the airplane’s cabin, using framing, lighting and contrast techniques that embellish the product and are presented as evidence of luxury and comfort. One could say that the latter is not persuasive, but stimulatory: the photo makes people desire to be in the situation of the passenger. However, the argumentation of the economist may be full of spurious and tricky arguments that are derived from graphics which contain irreproachable data that, nonetheless, is visually represented with bias or is interpreted univocally or not contrasted with other equally relevant data:

The problem, then, will not be to distinguish philosophy from advertising, mysticism from political propaganda, or psychoanalysis from psychagogy. The problem, at this point, is another: is the category of persuasion as solid and homogeneous as we had suspected so far, or is it more convenient, regardless of what I am allowed to qualify as persuasive “genres,” to establish a different distinction? (Eco 1986b: 19, my translation)

The distinction which must be made, according to Eco, is between persuasion and *suasion*, understood to be “a discourse that brings persuasion techniques into play which are not presented as such ... Suasion is a short-circuited enthymeme which does not reveal its persuasive nature” (1986b: 115, my translation). For Eco, *suasive* is all that which does not distinguish between argument, proof and

examples. As *suasive* seems to be mistaken for persuasive, a much more common adjective, Eco seems to appeal precisely to a complete, finished, *perfect* action that adds the prefix *per-*: persuade is the action of *suading* taken to completion, completed even in the declaration of intent, while *suasive* seeks to achieve goals in a more sibylline manner.

Ultimately, and as is the case of kitsch, Eco puts *persuasion* through a discriminatory filter. Not all persuasions – as not all forms of art for the masses – should be the object of distrust, contempt, fear or moral censorship. It is false that some genres of social discourse – for example advertising, either commercial or political – are more prone than others – philosophy, economics, law, sociology (even semiotics) – to tortuous (per)suasion. Moreover, Eco suggests that it is the opposite: we know the aims of advertising aims and the tricks they use, but we generally tend to lower our guard when faced with scientific, historical or academic discourse.

Persuasion “is a humanistic art, whose technique and need has sunk to the very depths of our civilization.” The nuance is in the malice: “Persuasion may be rude, but it is always honest. “Suasion can be sublime, but it is always malicious, wherever you find it.” And he concludes: “it is the task of semiotics, as a critique of ideology, to practice mistrust and teach how to practice it: denouncing suasion where it is masked as persuasion, and recognizing the interweaving of both as an unavoidable condition of our discourse”<sup>2</sup> (1986b: 27, my translation).

Thus, kitsch does not designate all mass culture and art, nor all persuasion is false discourse, even if we aim to place it within the narrow limits of political propaganda and advertising. Both have suffered, one due to generalization and the other due to particularization, from unfair preventions and disrepute. Art for the masses and persuasion often take the form of white lies which help us enjoy and find reasons for acting. Kitsch and suasion are malicious lies which make us confused about the objective of our enjoyment and the foundations of our beliefs and actions.

## 4 The lie as a *stress test* of semiotics

If we delve into Eco’s academic works in the field of semiotics, *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) constitutes a milestone in our investigation into lies. For Eco, our status as beings capable of producing and interpreting signs (our condition of semiotic animals, in short) is built with the lie as the centerpiece. The Italian author said, in fact:

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<sup>2</sup> Eco continued reflecting on deceptive persuasion in “The wolf and the lamb: the rhetoric of oppression” (2007: 44–65).

Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all

So that, "the definition of a 'theory of the lie' should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics" (1976: 7). He further pointed out that "the possibility of lying is the *proprium* of semiosis just as (for the Schoolmen) the possibility of laughing was the *proprium* of Man as *animal rationale*" (1976: 58–59).

This is not a *boutade* – which he was so fond of – but a rigorous description. If signs are what we say, draw, recount, sing, photograph, record and exhibit in place of something else, and this something else is, understandably, not present when we represent it (we actually resort to the sign in order to evoke something even though it is not present: the sign emerges to compensate for an absence or a distance), then the possibility of falsely representing this something else is an almost irresistible temptation.

In other words, and to put it somewhat crudely, if the sign is what replaces and represents another thing in its absence (and this is its greatest utility), nothing prevents this sign from substituting and representing a different thing (whether it exists or not). If the sign is valid for us and produces its effects, even when it impersonates the legitimate representative (we could say abducted and gagged) and, beyond this, builds in our minds a state of affairs that does not correspond to anything factual, and is even the opposite, this means that the semiotic remission has worked. It has worked, perhaps even too well: it is not dysfunctional, it is ultra-functional.

In any case, it seems clear that the effort required to build a lie is greater than the effort needed to tell the plain truth. Whatever its degree of distance from the truth, we must dress the lie with believable clothing, work hard to provide evidence for the lie and present it in a convincing manner. The great effort needed to do this leads to suspicion of falseness. The Latin proverb says: *excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta*. All unrequested emphasis or prolixity is almost incriminating.

In fact, if we move – slightly<sup>3</sup> – from the lie to literary fiction, we find that one of the most consistent "fictionality rates" is the presence of detailed scenes, dialogues collected *in extenso* and *verbatim*, and detailed descriptions (Van Dijk 1975: 292–293). All this suggests to the reader (but also to the spectator of a film or

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<sup>3</sup> Eco defines literary creation as a false act of reference that communicates *meanings* but does not mention *objects* or existential situations, "semiotic acts in which reference does not exist or is fictitious" (Eco 1999: 175). He also employs van Dijk's distinction between natural and artificial narratives (1975: 285–287) in *Six walks in the fictional woods* (1994d: 119–120).



a television series, for example) that it is not a history book (nor a news channel or a documentary, we could add), but a fictional work of imagination. Nothing prevents a history book from doing all this, but if it does so, we would say that it is not very authentic. Not to mention if it presents a literal dialogue from the past (unless it comes from a transcription of that epoch) or boasts of possessing knowledge about the motivations and feelings of the protagonists of the story (and for this it would have to refer to documentary sources, diaries or confessions). We could say that direct access to the deep subjectivity of characters is one of the distinctive traits of fiction.

In conclusion, if we can say that “reality surpasses fiction” sometimes, it is because the opposite usually happens, because fictional narrative worlds are more convoluted or exploit combinations which are beyond chronicles, reports or documents. The narrators of fiction do not only produce fake characters, spaces, times and causal relationships between events, but they also fake to be able to access sources of knowledge out of the reach of the chronicler and the historian. Works of fiction, as lies, are not deficits of significance, but surpluses. Pretenses are generally not subtractive operations, for which the simulation of the act would be less complex than the very act that is simulated, but additive, expansive, digressive and baroque operations (Genette 1991: 48). Thus, it is at this crossroads between fiction and lies where the latest incursions into the work of Eco will be made.

## 5 The lie as tragedy: historiographic metafiction

We have seen three versions of the lie in Eco's works and they deserve a sympathetic or at least nuanced look: the artistic lie, the persuasive lie, the lie as a condition of possibility of all semiosis and as *stress test* of all sign producers and interpreters. In the end, we have concocted a parallelism between the lie and narrative fiction, a parallelism which favors the lie: they both have passion for digressive details, the chaining of causes and effects, and introspection which suggests honesty, but is actually a simulation.

These three versions date back to the 1960s and 1970s. In more recent years, Eco's perspective became more bitter, curiously in coincidence with the progress of his literary career. One could say that as he builds his narrative architectures, extensively documented and with rigorous historical support, his faith in the lie (as an intellectual romp, a half *tour de force* and *mot d'esprit* without side effects) is dissolved. It is faced with other lies which have dramatically distorted the course of history.

Indeed, the historical research with which Eco documented his novels, set in an arc spanning from the twelfth century of *Baudolino* to the 1990s of *Number Zero*, convinced him of the disturbing permeability of the boundary between fiction and historical account. To such an extent that his novels are not so much fictions to be added to the fictions of the world, but “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 1988: 105–123). They are metafiction whose basis is not only, nor for the most part, other fictions, but also non-fictional documents. Eco could belong to that group of postmodern storytellers, authors of novels who investigate the “linking of ‘fictitious’ to ‘mendacious’ stories (and histories) ... whose metafictional self-reflexivity (and intertextuality) renders their implicit claims to historical veracity somewhat problematic, to say the least” (1988: 108). As Hutcheon puts elsewhere:

Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature (Hutcheon 1989: 3).

Many of the texts around which Eco’s novels revolve are fake historiographic documents but had a considerable influence on the history of humanity. These texts include the Letter of Presbiter Joannis (*Baudolino*) and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (*Foucault’s Pendulum* [partially] and *The Prague Cemetery*), two of the biggest literary hoaxes ever attempted, which undoubtedly had some influence on the promotion of Western colonialism in the modern era, and anti-Semitic laws and the Jewish Holocaust, respectively (Coletti 2009: 81–83; Boym 1999).

From here on, this work will deal in some detail with the historiographic metafiction of Eco’s last two novels, *The Prague Cemetery* (2010a) and *Number Zero* (2015), although they culminate Echian themes which date back many decades, topics related to lies, secrecy and conspiracy, but whose treatment shows a pessimistic and disenchanting turn.

The protagonist of *The Prague Cemetery* (2010a) is Simone Simonini, a man born in Turin in 1830 (little more than a century earlier than Eco himself). Simonini is a notary and counterfeiter (one activity does not prevent but contributes to the other), who takes part in one way or another in important events of nineteenth century Europe: the unification of Italy, the Franco-Prussian War, the Paris Commune, and the Dreyfus affair. Simonini is a little like Baudolino, another born liar but from the medieval period. However, the former resorts less to unlimited invention than to shameless plagiarism and he must often cover his tracks by resorting to murder. Simonini specializes in the writing of secret reports that pretend to faithfully describe incriminating events. All the reports are written in the same pattern, an archetypal text which in essence refers to a

meeting of the members of a community or sect in a suitably sinister and lugubrious place (the Prague Cemetery), in the style of the Gothic and, later, romantic novel, to hatch a plot against the established power, which the report aims precisely to alert.

The idea had haunted Eco for a long time. There are two short theoretical texts, “Fictional Protocols” (1994d: 117–142) and “The force of falsity” (1998: 1–22, later republished as “The power of falsehood,” 2004: 272–301), in which Eco wrapped himself in a famous fabulation which, presented as a trustworthy document, was tragically toxic: the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The story narrated in that document – the terrifying global conspiracy of the Jews against all current political, economic, educational and religious institutions and states in order to subvert them – was actually an old narrative obsession of Eco, as is well known. In fact, chapters 90 to 96 of *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988) already dealt with the issue, and both the chapters of the novel and the essays, re-emerged in turn in novelesque clothing, in this case as a central theme in his penultimate novel, *The Prague Cemetery* (2010a). The crucial point is that Eco demonstrates the porosity and the merging between fictional and pseudo-historic narratives, and this is the underlying theory of his novel.

To reconstruct the complex intertextual avatar of the document, Eco goes back to the conspiracy that brought the Templars to an end in the fourteenth century, to the conspiracy theories that have denounced their clandestine survival ever since, and their involvement in all kinds of plots and revolutions (which is precisely the narrative substance, viewed from the present, of *Foucault’s Pendulum*, 1988). Eco continues with the resurrection of prejudice against the purported Templars in *Mémoires pour servir à l’Histoire du Jacobinisme* of Abbé Barruel (1797–1798), in which Napoleon was very interested. In *Foucault’s Pendulum*, Eco recalls a historical Simonini, who would later be the grandfather of the fictional, homonymous protagonist of *The Prague Cemetery*. In 1806, Simonini writes a letter to Barruel to remind him of the role of the Jews in the Foundation of Freemasonry, and their role as necessary collaborators in all secret societies.

The story remained dormant for half a century, but reappeared in the mid-nineteenth century, and served the purposes of the Jesuits who sought to discredit the Garibaldians and Carbonari (whose conspiratorial political affiliation is traced back to the Templars and the Rosicrucians). Eco proves that the sinister scene of the conspiracy in *The Protocols* is taken from Alexandre Dumas’s *Joseph Balsamo* (1849).

Half-woven with threads of supposedly rigorous reports (Barruel himself (1797–1798), the historic Simonini (1806), an informant of the Czarist political police called Rachkovsky) and novelesque inventions (Dumas, although also

Eugène Sue's *The Wandering Jew* and *The mysteries of Paris*; Maurice Joly's *The Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu* 1864; Goedsche's 1868 anti-Semitic novel *Biarritz*), we reach *The Protocols*, which in 1905 suggested "the final solution" and was a bedside book for Hitler and other Nazi leaders (De Benedictis 2011; Cameron 2011; Sanjinés 2014). The rest, as Eco says, is history.<sup>4</sup>

As previously mentioned, the plot of Eco's novel is summarized in the aforementioned chapters of *Foucault's Pendulum*, but it was outlined much earlier. In *The Superman of the Masses* (1978), Eco collected his studies on authors such as Sue and Dumas, among others. The common thread of the articles, some published a decade earlier, was a brilliant idea of Antonio Gramsci, according to which "a superman ... appears earlier than in the pages of Nietzsche – or his Nazi ideological counterfeiters – in the pages of the popular, populist and democratic novel" (1978: 88). And Eco adds:

Whether we look at the Society of Jesus, as portrayed in Sue's *The Wandering Jew*, or the Black Suits of Ponson du Terrail, in the Children of Kali of the same author, or the blood oath of the Three Musketeers ... the secret society is the mask of the hero (1978: 83).

And so, nearly forty years after his prologues for popular French novels of the mid-nineteenth century, which are *consolatory* not only in the aesthetic field (like *kitsch*) but also in rhetorical and ideological fields (such as political propaganda and advertising), Eco crystallizes a fictional invention in which he returns to those novels and condenses the lie, history, secrecy and conspiracy perfectly.

Eco's fictional Simonini expresses the leitmotif of *The Prague Cemetery* and points towards the idea of the essentially consolatory character of the secret in the following fragment:

Let us imagine conspirators who come from every part of the world and represent the tentacles of their sect spread throughout every country. Let us assemble them in a forest clearing, a cave, a castle, a Cemetery or a crypt, provided it is reasonably dark. Let us get one of them to pronounce a discourse that clearly sets out the plan, and the intention to conquer the world ... I have known many people who feared the conspiracy of some hidden enemy – for my grandfather it was the Jews, for the Jesuits it was the Masons, for my Garibaldian father it was the Jesuits, for the kings of half of Europe it was the Carbonari, for my Mazzinian companions it was the king backed by the clergy, for the police throughout half the world it was the Bavarian Illuminati, and so forth. Who knows how many other people in this world still think they are being threatened by some conspiracy? Here's a form to be filled out at will, by each person with his own conspiracy. (Eco 2010a: 78)

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<sup>4</sup> It is no coincidence that Eco wrote the prologue for Will Eisner's graphic novel titled *The Plot* (2005). Eisner confessed that he chose this apocryphal report when he learned that Radio Islam was broadcasting a radio version of the *Protocols*.

The issue is that the confusion of historical or documentary evidence with novelesque fiction (termed *pseudologia*) may result in a tender or pathetic lie, like the lie of those who search for a person called Emma Bovary in the records of French provincial towns, or search for traces of Sherlock Holmes on Baker Street, or go to Dublin “to seek out the chemist shop where Bloom bought a lemon-shaped bar of soap (and in order to satisfy these literary pilgrims, that chemist, which really does exist, has begun to produce that kind of soap again)” (Eco 2004: 5). Some of the consequences may be undesirable, but harmless, as they only affect literary criticism: reflected by those who argue that “D’Artagnan was motivated by a homosexual passion for Porthos” or that “Panurge acts the way he does out of hatred for nascent capitalism” (2004: 7), or those who find sources or reasons which have no rational explanation in the work of the author, even in Eco’s own novelistic work, overinterpretations or misreadings that he analyzed in his postscript to *The name of the rose* (1994e).

There are other hermeneutic lies which can be disastrous, like the one Eco dealt with for decades: the lie that wrongfully interprets historical or scientific documents, and particularly the lie that produces pseudo-historical and pseudo-scientific documents which endorse interpretations and, thus, political positions and even military actions (Eco 2012 [2008]). As Eco pointed out in an interview on the occasion of the presentation of *The Prague Cemetery*, “History is made up of fakes and forgeries from the Donation of Constantine to the letter of Prester John, to the War of Iraq” (Capozzi 2014: 852).

## 6 The lie as farce: secrets and conspiracies in the digital era

If the secrets and lies of *The Protocols* produced the hecatombs we already know, today’s secrets and lies are no less tragic, but, as someone already said, they now also acquire an air of farce. The year of publication of *The Prague Cemetery* coincided with the WikiLeaks scandal, which did not escape Eco’s attention:

The WikiLeaks confirm the fact that every file put together by a secret service (of any nation you like) is exclusively made up of press clippings. The “extraordinary” American revelations about Berlusconi’s sex habits merely relay what could already be read for months in any newspaper (except those owned by Berlusconi himself, needless to say), and the sinister caricature of Gaddafi has long been the stuff of cabaret farce ... The rule that says secret files must only contain news that is already common knowledge is essential to the dynamic of secret services, and not only in the present century. Go to an

esoteric book shop and you'll find that every book on the shelf (on the Holy Grail, the "mystery" of Rennes-le-Château [a hoax theory concocted to draw tourists to a French town], on the Templars or the Rosicrucians) is a point-by-point rehash of what is already written in older books. [...] The same goes for secret files. The informant is lazy. So is the head of the secret service ... : he only regards as true what he recognizes. The top-secret dope on Berlusconi that the US embassy in Rome beamed to the Department of State was the same story that had come out in Newsweek the week before. (Eco 2010b)

As Boym points out (1999: 98), "contemporary conspiratorial theater contains an element of the medieval mystery play and a touch of nineteenth-century melodrama: here premodern fantasies coexist with modern problems and post-modern technology." In any case, the only "novelty" of WikiLeaks, according to Eco, is that it took us back to a *vintage* era in the economy of the secret: a return to the message in manuscript, memorized and destroyed after being read, and hacker-proof. A return to the good old days of "analogue" spies, who travelled without electronic devices, in diligence, along little-travelled roads, safe from hackers and geolocators. This is further evidence of the crabwise advances and even of the "turning back the clock" of technology, but also of society, politics, economy and culture in general, which was precisely the unifying theme of one of Eco's essays with the same title (2007). However, with WikiLeaks, the Secrets of Power, which we assumed to be compromising and terrible, turned out to be trivial: they were empty secrets. WikiLeaks showed the real powers (insignificant, ridiculous) of Hillary Clinton and did not affect Berlusconi nor Gaddafi very much, who we already imagined being that way.

In fact, *Number Zero* (2015), Eco's last novel, although set in the Italy of the early 1990s, fictionalizes this idea: the secret dossiers of the information services are empty secrets. Their power lies in the threat of their disclosure, not because they will reveal monstrosities people never imagined, but because their revelation will oblige the information services to produce new secrets to substitute the old ones and to feed the repressive anguish.

*Number Zero* interweaves two conspiracy plots which somehow reflect one another in deforming mirrors. On the one hand, there is a plot led by a tycoon with his new newspaper, which is actually a sham of a newspaper never intended to be published (installed in a perpetual Number Zero), but capable of making extortions by threatening to reveal the corrupt acts and dirty dealings of local politicians and entrepreneurs (which are in any case *vox populi*). On the other hand, there is an obsessive editor, who collects evidence of the survival of Mussolini after the war by fleeing abroad, and his role in the Italian faction of the Operation Gladio, which aimed to prevent the arrival of the Communist Party to power. Hence the editor explains the Piazza Fontana bombing, the murder of Aldo Moro, the sudden death of Pope John Paul I, the Vatican banking scandal,

the P2 Masonic lodge, the shooting of Pope John Paul II. This editor ends tragically when he is about to conclude his investigation and when the BBC had just revealed in a documentary the ulterior motives of the Gladio (in fact it was even before: Christian Democrat Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti publicly recognized the existence of Gladio at a parliamentary commission on 24 October 1990). The editor's paranoid mosaic of conspiracies is well-reflected in this quote:

Did you see those news stories a year ago, during the Gulf War, about the dying cormorant covered in tar in the Persian Gulf? Then it was shown to be impossible for cormorants to be in the Gulf at that time of year, and the pictures had been taken eight years earlier, during the time of the Iran-Iraq War. Or, according to others, the cormorants had been taken from the zoo and covered with crude oil, which was what they must have done with Fascist crimes. Let's be clear, I [don't] want to pretend that Jews were not murdered. But I no longer trust anything. Did the Americans really go to the moon? It's not impossible that they staged the whole thing in a studio —if you look at the shadows of the astronauts after the Moon landing, they're not believable. And did the Gulf War really happen, or did they just show us old clips from the archives? There are lies all around us, and if you know they're feeding you lies, you've got to be suspicious all the time. I'm suspicious, I'm always suspicious. (Eco 2015: 31)

Thus, the lie in Eco achieves an ultimate embodiment, protected in a perpetually empty but active secret, exerting its effects from that emptiness which can be filled with whatever is more suitable at a given time. Eco's last novel manifests his disappointment with this (post-truth?, paranoid?) era in which we live. In fact, in an interview granted in 2013, before *Number Zero* but shortly after the appearance of his collection of essays *Inventing the Enemy* (Eco 2012 [2008]), he himself acknowledged that “things got worse in the last years (the era of Bush and Berlusconi) and I felt compelled to react more energetically, expressing (sometimes in satirical way) my indignation” (2013: 53).

## 7 Conclusions

The lie – and the multiple masks it adopts – could be considered the motor behind much of Eco's work, be it academic, journalistic or literary. This central theme was not motivated, however, by a moralistic purpose, but by the lucid and ludic desire for knowledge. And this is because the lie in which Eco was interested, and which he aimed to save from the moral censorship that this term usually inspires, was a playful lie, an ironic lie, the lie of shared intelligence. Hence his discourse on the lie always strove to draw a boundary which saved and



reserved one part: the art of the masses from the specific falsification of kitsch; the more or less subtle persuasion (including advertising and propaganda) from false suasion; the lie in its abstract form as the foundation of the building of all semiosis from the lie as a matter of ethics and deontology; the creative lie that builds reality and expands the world (*auctor* is he who augments) from the lie that shoddily distorts and impoverishes the world; the secret as a tactic of shared fantasy or a social “paste” around risks, from the secret as a strategy of extortion or – once revealed – as a turnoff which leads us to the presumption of another greater and more terrible secret.

To a certain extent, Eco’s intellectual avatar is characterized by a certain disenchantment (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2018: 79–113). It could be argued that in his last years he became disappointed with the lie. That disappointment is as an integral part of an undoubtedly more general intellectual evolution. For example, his position on popular culture evolved from a warm welcome and support for its incorporation in the field of aesthetic and semiotic reflection, into an apocalyptic view of the Internet and social networks and the destructive diagnosis of the depressing *regression* of cultural standards (Eco 2007, 2012 [2008], 2017). His tenets on open interpretation, evolved from the idea of reading as cooperation and strategy poured into a non-closed text, which invites us to join in the game, into admonishments about the passage from interpretation to the use and abuse of texts and about deconstructive drifts fatally doomed to sinking (Pisanty 2015). However, while in these cases disappointment is more evident and has already been described (Bondanella 1997; Escudero Chauvel 1997; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2001; Bianchi 2015; Pisanty 2015), in the case of the lie, disappointment deserves special attention and this is why these pages have been devoted to this very task.

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